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# (U) Nazi Resister or Soviet Spy? The Case of Mildred Fish-Harnack, Her Husband, and the OSS

Note: Although the following article raises important and difficult questions, it also contains numerous inaccuracies and oversimplifications. These are detailed in an appendix following the text. Mildred Fish-Harnack was not a US Government employee and had not signed any oath of office, bur readers need to be aware that, regardless of any impression they may gain from the article, your oath of office embodies a lifelong obligation to protect classified information and that unauthorized disclosures—and especially committing espionage against the United States—are never acceptable, regardless of reason or motive.

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The scene is Germany in the 1930s. Darkness lurks beneath Berlin's seemingly enchanted surface. Vengeance, murder, and espionage infiltrate the Nazi party, violence escalates, and one American woman risks everything to bring down Hitler.

Post World War I, Germany

In the 1920s, Germany was one of the most socially and academically progressive countries in the world, and its merits were beyond reproach. World-renowned academics and artists flocked to Germany to be a part of the forward-learning scene. Mildred Elizabeth Fish was no different. A fair-haired, blue-eyed daughter of American pioneers, Mildred grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin—one of the most German of American cities. Academically gifted and described as beautiful and brilliant, she had a theatrical presence and was an inspirational writer. She studied humanities, journalism, and literature at the University of Wisconsin, where she met Dr. Arvid Harnack, a Rockefeller Fellow from one of Berlin's most illustrious families, and the two fell in love.

In 1926, the couple married, and three years later, they moved to Germany, where Mildred pursued her doctorate in American studies and worked as an assistant lecturer and translator, while Arvid completed a second doctorate in philosophy in Giessen. In 1931, Arvid co-founded the Scientific Working Community for the Study of the Soviet Planned Economy. Scientists, intellectuals, and revolutionaries intrigued with communism as an economic solution to Germany's economic woes after the First World War joined the group to discuss Germany's future.

The Depression Years and the Rise of Nazism

Germany's post-war depression ripened the conditions for a German revolution. Poverty, disease, and a torrent of violence polarized the country between those who sought communism as a solution and those who blamed the capitalists and communists for Germany's plight. Mildred and Arvid believed in the merits of Marxism. In 1932, they traveled to the Soviet Union, where they learned about progressive concepts such as maternity leave, equal pay, and birth control education. Afterward, Mildred studied communism with keen interest, hoping to find a solution to end poverty. Mildred's leftist



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Arvid Harnack.

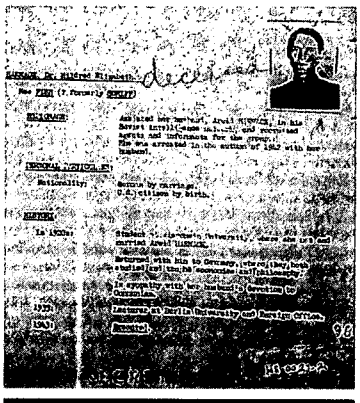
tendencies were hardly secret, as she had encouraged her students to study Karl Marx's theories as a practical solution to the evils of the present.

While communism did not gain traction in Germany, national socialism did. Led by Adolf Hitler, an egocentric World War I veteran, the right-wing Nazi party took control of the German parliament, and in 1933, Hitler became Chancellor. Later that year, newly appointed US Ambassador to Germany William Dodd arrived with his family in Berlin. Dodd's daughter Martha befriended Mildred, and they worked to obtain visas for Jews and other Nazi political opponents helping them to flee the country.

Mildred and the Red Orchestra

In 1937 Mildred's husband, Arvid, a committed communist, joined the Nazi party as a condition to remain employed as a civil servant, as well as penetrate the Reich's Ministry of Economics where he gained insight into Hitler's war preparations. He established a relationship with US First Secretary Donald Heath, an intelligence officer in the Coordinator of Information, the predecessor of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). When the meetings between Arvid and Heath became too dangerous, Mildred began tutoring Heath's son as cover story to get him the in-depth reports. Heath gave the reports to the State Department, who passed them to Moscow. Stalin ignored them.

After the war started, all US government personnel withdrew from Germany, and the Soviets then approached Arvid directly. Distrustful of Stalin, Arvid reluctantly agreed to provide them with information, but only with the understanding that his motives were to save Germany and not to further Soviet goals. Over the next few years, Arvid's and Mildred's espionage activities became an integral part of a loose-knit Soviet spy ring later dubbed "The Red Orchestra."



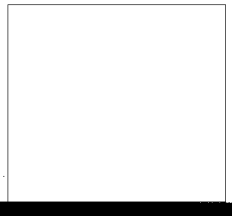
Mildred's Counterintelligence Corp Red Orchestra file.

Eclectic and effective, the Red Orchestra spy network comprised more than 600 informers of every ethnic and political persuasion, both men and women, from aristocrat to proletariat. It even included high-ranking German officers. Its sole purpose was to eradicate Nazism. Women across Europe participated in resistance movements and became especially adept at clandestine operations. They possessed a keen ability to obtain and pass information without gaining the attention of officials.

As a link between the Red Orchestra and Soviet agents, Mildred became a master of espionage to undermine the Nazi movement. In addition to printing and dispensing leaflets, she recruited Nazi resistance fighters and used her position in a Berlin publishing firm as cover to liaise with other members of the resistance. She also refined her own playbook of subtle interrogation techniques on Lieutenant Herbert Gollnow, a German military intelligence officer who had sought her out as an English tutor. Mildred uncovered 12 military intelligence sabotage operations scheduled to take place behind Russian lines. Using the information she obtained, the Russians thwarted the operations.

Captured, Interrogated, and Executed

Shortly after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, German counterintelligence discovered the Red Orchestra when they discovered an encoded radio transmission sent by a Soviet agent. The transmission inadvertently provided the true names and addresses of three Red Orchestra members, including Arvid. In 1942, the Gestapo arrested the Harnacks, along with more than 58 other resistance fighters in the Red Orchestra.



The memorial wall at Plötzensee Prison at the execution site.

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The Gestapo interrogated and tortured Arvid, and a military tribunal tried and convicted him of espionage and treason. In December 1942, the Gestapo hanged Arvid in Berlin's Plötzensee Prison. The Gestapo also interrogated and tortured Mildred. The tribunal found her guilty of accessory to espionage and sentenced her to six years of hard labor; however, Hitler thought the punishment was too lenient, rejected the sentence, and demanded a retrial. The military tribunal then found her guilty of espionage and treason and sentenced her to death. Before she was executed by guillotine on 16 February 1943, she spoke her last words: "And I have loved Germany so much." Mildred was the only American woman ever executed on Hitler's orders.

Lost to the Cold War Era

It took nearly two years for the Germans to break open the entire Red Orchestra network, but not until after the Russians defeated them on the Eastern Front. At the war's end, the newly formed Allies made efforts to identify survivors of the Red Orchestra who had eluded capture or death, fearing they might have continued spying for the Soviets.

In 1946, the US Army's War Crimes Group, using information directly supplied by the Gestapo, determined that Mildred—a dual German-American citizen—had been deeply involved in anti-Nazi underground activities in Germany and learned about her execution for treason.

Mildred's resistance efforts against the Nazis were largely forgotten in the US because of the anti-communist hysteria that consumed post-war America. Her effort was not lost entirely. In 1986, the state of Wisconsin declared her birthday, 16 September, as Mildred Harnack Remembrance Day. Additionally, students at the Mildred Harnack School in Berlin—named in 1976—created a memorial exhibit, which was displayed in major cities across Germany. The exhibit eventually was sent to the Hillel Foundation and the Milwaukee Jewish Museum in Madison, Wisconsin.

A Case Study in the Moral Ambiguity of Intelligence

The Mildred Harnack School in Berlin.

Select documents about Mildred Harnack and the Red Orchestra remain classified, but many of her efforts are documented publicly. In 2011, Wisconsin Public Television aired a show entitled Wisconsin's Nazi Resistance: The Mildred Fish-Harnack Story, which is the first documentary to tell her story. The program's account of Mildred's activities as an American Nazi resister who, by all accounts, deserved recognition as one of the most important pre-OSS spies of the 20th century and not just a simple Soviet spy. Mildred fought and died trying to rid the world of Nazism, one of the most sinister regimes of modern history.

The case of Mildred Fish-Harnack highlights the impossible positions in which people sometimes find themselves. What were Mildred's primary motivations behind her choice to fight the Nazis? Was she an anti-Nazi resister for moral reasons or did fighting the Nazis provide a platform for her to further her communist leanings? Where did her loyalties lie? What would she have done if had she not been executed? Would she have returned to the US, stayed in Germany, or would she have spied for the Soviets in the coming years as her friend Martha did?

There is little doubt that Mildred, her husband, and their counterparts acted in support of the high ideals in which they so deeply believed. Marxism during the 1930s was different from what it became after World War II. We'll never know what Mildred would have done if she had escaped the war, and that unknowable truth keeps her as one of history's more controversial espionage figures. While the full extent of her motivations is not completely clear, we know that people throughout Europe during the 1930s and 1940s faced impossible situations. In Nazi Germany, either you were a Nazi or you fought against them. Mildred chose to fight.

(U) What's News wants your feedback. Was this article interesting? Yes or No.

Arvid and Mildred.

The notes that follow point out problems with the above article. They were prepared by the Counterintelligence Mission Center and coordinated with CIA's History Staff.

In the 1920s, Germany was one of the most socially and academically progressive countries in the world, and its merits were beyond reproach. This statement greatly oversimplifies the state of Germany in the years between the World Wars. It is true that Germany in the twenties was home to a great deal of artistic and social experimentation, but the country was

also deeply divided and politically unstable. Nationalist, Communist, and Fascist parties contended for power, often violently. Fascists and Communists, moreover, were dedicated to destroying the Weimar state and ending all democratic and progressive experiments. By 1930, Germany's political instability had become so great the Weimar chancellor, a political centrist, needed emergency powers to govern. Finally, the German government in 1922 began working closely with the Soviet Union in the military and defense industrial spheres—a violation of the Versailles Treaty—to further the two nations' common goals of overturning the post-World War I settlements.

Mildred and Arvid believed in the merits of Marxism. In 1932, they traveled to the Soviet Union, where they learned about progressive concepts such as maternity leave, equal pay, and birth control education. It was common in the 1930s for Western Marxist intellectuals to visit the Soviet Union. These trips, however, did not provide disinterested examinations of Soviet life (in which women hardly were treated as equals). Instead, the Soviet regime carefully staged the visits to provide an unrealistic, idealized view of life in Russia and to indoctrinate the visitors with the teachings of Soviet Communism—which, by 1932, revolved around Stalin's word and brooked no debates or dissent from his ideology. Whatever the Harnacks were shown during their visit, however, it is worth noting that Mildred Fish-Harnack traveled to and from Moscow by train through the Ukraine during the famine that Stalin inflicted on the region. She presumably would have seen mass starvation yet, like many others, did not question the Soviet system. The Soviets also used these scripted visits to prepare visitors to return to the West and work in Communist parties—which, again, served Moscow's interests —and also to recruit and train visitors in espionage. Arvid Harnack, according to KGB archivist Vasili Mitrokhin, agreed to become a Soviet intelligence source (codenamed CORSICAN) during this trip, although he was not formally recruited as a spy until 1940.[1]

While Communism did not gain traction in Germany, national socialism did. It is true that the National Socialist (Nazi) Party took power in Germany in 1933, after a series of elections, but it is inaccurate to say that Communism failed to gain traction among Germans. In fact, the German Communist Party was the largest such party outside the Soviet Union, and much of the political violence plaguing Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s occurred between Communists and various German nationalist groups, including Nazis. Areas of large cities, including Berlin, were known as "red districts" and continued to be centers of anti-Nazi activity following Hitler's rise to power. This continued to be the case well into the war.

In 1937 Mildred's husband, Arvid, a committed communist, joined the Nazi party as a condition to remain employed as a civil servant, as well as penetrate the Reich's Ministry of Economics where he gained insight into Hitler's war preparations. While Arvid eventually became a Nazi Party member to keep his job, he actually joined Germany's Ministry of Economics in 1933, after he returned from Moscow.[2]

He established a relationship with US First Secretary Donald Heath, an intelligence officer in the Coordinator of Information, the predecessor of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS).The intelligence body that existed prior to the OSS was the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI).

After the war started, all US government personnel withdrew from Germany. This statement appears to refer to the beginning of World War II in Europe in September 1939. The US Embassy in Berlin remained open and staffed, however, until Germany and the United States declared war on each other in December 1941, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Distrustful of Stalin, Arvid reluctantly agreed to provide them with information, but only with the understanding that his motives were to save Germany and not to further Soviet goals. Mitrokhin characterizes Arvid as the Soviet Union's "most important German agent" in the late 1930s. Following his and Mildred's return from Moscow, Arvid maintained sporadic contact with Soviet intelligence officers (in part caused by Stalin's ruthless purges of Communist officials in the late 1930s, of which Arvid undoubtedly was aware). Nonetheless, he remained highly productive. During a two-year lapse in contact that began in 1938, Arvid, on his own and without formal tasking, recruited a network of about sixty individuals to spy for Moscow.[3]

Eclectic and effective, the Red Orchestra spy network comprised more than 600 informers of every ethnic and political persuasion, both men and women, from aristocrat to proletariat. the Red Orchestra was indeed eclectic—nearly 50 percent of the members in the two cells established by Arvid and one of his key sources were academics, authors, journalists, and students[4]—and they collected large amounts of sensitive intelligence, but their ultimate impact remains open to question. Arvid's spy ring and other Red Orchestra members, for example, provided multiple warnings about Germany's plans to invade the Soviet Union. Stalin, chronically distrustful of his intelligence system and prone to conspiratorial thinking, ignored them.[5] Similarly, Arvid's group later in 1941 passed sensitive information about the German Air Force, but it had little military or operational benefit for Soviet forces.[6] Finally, historical accounts note that the mixing of espionage and resistance activities heightened operational risks to Red Orchestra members, many of whom knew of each other, as in the case of the group of agents around Arvid and Mildred.[7]

It took nearly two years for the Germans to break open the entire Red Orchestra network, but not until after the Russians defeated them on the Eastern Front. The Battle of Stalingrad, which ended in February 1943, generally is considered the turning point for German fortunes on the Eastern Front. The Gestapo, however, neutralized the Harnack group and the rest of the Red Orchestra in the summer and fall of 1942, well before Stalingrad was decided.[8]

In 1946, the US Army's War Crimes Group, using information directly supplied by the Gestapo. The Gestapo ceased to exist when Germany surrendered in May 1945 and it never cooperated with US authorities. Any Gestapo information used by the United States for war crimes investigations and trials came from captured records or interrogations of captured Gestapo personnel.

Mildred's resistance efforts against the Nazis were largely forgotten in the US because of the anti-Communist hysteria that consumed post-war America. The nature of anti-Communism in the postwar United States continues to be debated by historians. While some aspects of anti-Communism during this period, most notably Senator McCarthy's activities, may be labeled as hysterical, we need to remember that the Soviet Union after World War II presented a new and unprecedented threat to US security, and that Communist spies had been uncovered in the US Government. To characterize the entire reaction to postwar Soviet intelligence activity as hysterical is overly simplistic, especially because, as the article notes, Anglo-American authorities feared that Red Orchestra spies like Mildred Fish-Harnack "might have continued spying for the Soviets" after the war. Mentioning in the next sentence the commemoration of Mildred's birthday in 1986, moreover, may create the erroneous implication that such hysteria continued for some 40 years.

The Mildred Harnack School in Berlin—named in 1976. The article should have noted that the school was located in East Berlin.

We'll never know what Mildred would have done had she escaped the war, and that unknowable truth keeps her one of history's more controversial espionage figures. It is accurate to say that no one can know what Mildred Fish-Harnack would have done had she lived. That said, numerous individuals who chose in the 1930s to spy for the Soviet Union —Alger Hiss, the members of the Rosenberg ring, Noel Field, Kim Philby and the other Cambridge spies—continued to do so after the war, often until they defected or were arrested. These spies often claimed to have been motivated by anti-Fascism but continued to spy long after the Nazis had been defeated.

Marxism during the 1930s was different from what it became after World War II. By the 1930s, Communism in the European context—transformed by Lenin's thinking, the Bolshevik success in 1917, and Stalin's consolidation of power —was already responsible for some of the worst human rights abuses in modern history. Millions died as a result of Stalin's actions, both before and after the war. While the extent of these abuses were not fully known in the 1930s, Moscow could not completely hide them from US and European audiences and some Western Communists walked away from their parties. In addition, Communist parties outside the Soviet Union were strictly controlled by Moscow and their members required to follow ideological instructions without question. To have spied for Moscow during this period means that Mildred and her husband willingly embraced an ideology they knew was not a form of Western democratic socialism.

A Case Study in the Moral Ambiguity of Intelligence. This section of the article raises important and difficult questions. While we can respect the sacrifice that Mildred Fish-Harnack made against the Nazis, she was never in an "impossible" position. She did not have to become a Stalinist agent to fight against Nazism.

- As a US citizen, Mildred could have returned to the United States (with Arvid) and joined any of the non-Communist political groups active against Fascism. After the United States entered the war, moreover, her German-language skills would have made her welcome in US intelligence and military efforts.
- Many prominent intellectuals, people similar to Mildred and Arvid, left Germany in the 1930s. Other European intellectuals fled as the German armies advanced. Members of these groups joined the Allied war effort or worked against the Nazis in other ways without becoming Communist agents.
- It is also important to note that many people who had joined Western Communist parties renounced their memberships when they learned of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in August 1939.

That Mildred Fish-Harnack chose to become a Soviet spy and was later honored by the East German regime are unquestionable indications that Moscow and East Berlin perceived her loyalty was to Stalin and the system that he ruled. It also shows that in taking a stand against a despotic regime, she fell into the intellectual and moral trap of standing with another, equally odious, tyranny.

[1] Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, KGB: The Inside Story: Of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 255; Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 91.

[2] Andrew and Gordievsky, 91.

[3] Andrew and Mitrokhin, 91-92.

[4] Andrew and Gordievsky, 274.

[5] Andrew and Mitrokhin, 92. See also, Andrew and Gordievsky, 257-269, and Shareen Brysac, Resisting Hitler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 311-12.

[6] Andrew and Gordievsky, 275.

[7] Andrew and Gordievsky, 256; 275-276; Andrew and Mitrokhin, 92.

[8] Andrew and Gordievsky, 274, 277.

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